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Stories

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to the people who helped make my way a little easier with their unselfish support and encouragement:

Desiree French
Ivan French
my parents
Joan Atherton
Larry Schmukler
the MFA's
Group Immaterial
Jim Reilly & IPI
...and of course, Judy, Martha and Annette

1. Process

My initial experimentation with words and images was, in retrospect, tentative and timid. At the end of my first year at RIT, after exploring various techniques and subject matters (including other people's family relationships), I produced a short series of toy camera C-prints with accompanying typed captions. These were not very successful or satisfying, and I began to cast about for a better means of combining image and text. Under the encouraging but scrupulous gaze of Judy Levy, Ann McCallister and Ann Satterfield, I began to experiment with spray painting stencilled lettering on black and white photographs, and making words part of the image with cliche-verre. At the same time, I was introduced to cyanotype and large-scale photocopying by Judy Natal, so my next step was quite natural.

In July of '88, I took the plunge and began to create the images from scratch as well as the words. I started to make relatively large-scale (30 X 40 inch) images incorporating cyanotype, unfused or regulation photocopies, lacquer or enamel spray paint and some three-dimensional elements. At no time in this initial stage was I trying to achieve "finished" or exhibition-grade work; the summer was a time to explore. I felt that until I had all the tools I needed in hand, it was pointless to expect thesis-level results.

And so, over the summer I made what became sketches of later, more elaborate pieces. There was a prototype of *Uncle Sam Meets Sam the Greenhorn*, as well as an untitled cyanotype using family snapshots and images of an overgrown, abandoned house. The one relatively finished image I made over the summer was *Same Dog Dog Different Day*. *Same Dog* pointed the way I was to travel;

it contained more densely layered images than I had attempted before, and was more blatantly three dimensional. I was gaining confidence, mixing my media with more assurance, and cutting more of my own stencils, both for imagery and lettering. I began to collect imagery and letter forms to use as raw material for my thesis.

As the summer came to a close (always an ambiguous event in Rochester), I felt that I was really on the trail of something. I still had technical obstacles ahead, but because of what I had recently learned, I was reassured that I could master technique as it was necessary. I had a script in hand for my first thesis endeavor, but the problem of form was troubling. I knew the first piece would be a narrative sequence about the similarities between a male/female relationship and diplomacy between nations. But how to establish a narrative sequence? I wanted to make large-scale work, but how to get it off the wall? I wanted a viewer to be able to walk around and interact with each image; for the experience to affect a person in the same way that certain books affect us...but how to do it?

In the fall, I had the good fortune to see the "Treasures of Japan" show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. There, standing out like a beacon (to my eyes, at any rate) in a forest of swords, armor, statuary, scrolls, tapestries, dowry sets, kimonos, etc., were a number of antique *shoji* screens.

Each of these room-dividing screens represented years of work--the painting and calligraphy were masterful, the construction precise. These screens were not only functional; they represented wealth and ostentation, refinement, knowledge of history, mythology, aesthetics, spirituality, even familiarity with geography. The manner of the *shoji* was instantly inspiring

to me. I responded to their potential for narrative, their decisive effect on the people and spaces around them, each screen's feeling of utility mixed with a calm authority. In short, the form of the screen matched the content I had been ruminating on for weeks. I wanted to make work that would stop the viewer, engage him/her, converse quietly, and then remain open for further scrutiny and interpretation. I wanted a form that could convey sequence with simultaneity of past, present and future. I wanted to work on a large enough scale to match outsize subject matter, but not large enough to intimidate. The screen form fit.

I decided to work on cloth for many reasons. Not only are large sheets of suitable paper hard to obtain and expensive, they're also fragile to the point of excessive paranoia. Cloth is easy to obtain and relatively cheap, malleable and suggestive; one might associate unbleached cotton cloth, for example, with flexibility, strength, clothing, drapery, walls, sails, paintings, tarps, and, in my case, the feminine side of myself.

I also intended to make screens that would, in contrast to Oriental screens, suggest books. That is, there would be narrative, illustrated text, printing-style design, storytelling, marks of aging, use and texture, etc. The sequential character of each screen would be emphasized by the pagelike nature of angled, attached panels; each faceted side of each screen could also function as a complete picture if the viewer moved back a few steps. Moving back a few more steps would reveal the full vista of the complete piece. One could "read" each portion of each panel, then each panel as a whole, then more than one panel at once, then all the panels, and finally all the panels in the context of the room, including oneself.

I wanted text and image to merge, for the viewer's brain to function on two levels simultaneously. Text must double as a part of the image--image must be digested at the same moment as text. I wanted a balance of the importance of the parts, and of compositional weight. If any part could be pried off and live on its own, and the rest of the parts not suffer from the loss, I felt the piece would be a failure. There must be a merging, a submersion of all the parts to form a new whole, or I was still typing captions for C-prints, and all the formal experimentation in the world wouldn't change that.

As I began my first screen (*Story Problem*), I realized that I had to loosen my grip on the photographic belief system and begin groping toward a more painterly understanding of imagemaking. In order to achieve the layering of meanings, multiple perspectives and openness of spirit that I desired, I had to stop striving to reveal things explicitly, and step into more implicit rendering. Gombrich's book was an invaluable help to me in this respect; part of his point being that the problems of imagemaking since the Renaissance have centered around the dilemma of creating a three-dimensional illusion on a two-dimensional surface. This dilemma also encompasses the many rebellions against illusionistic rendering. At the height of the illusionistic period, painting had evolved into an art of implication: the smallest amount of delineation needed to convey the maximum amount of implied information. Only with the advent of the photographic image (post-Romantic and pre-Impressionist) does the tradition of illusionism fracture and turn on itself. My feeling is that photography has reached a similar impasse. The root beliefs and conditions of the early photographic endeavor seem dated, foolish or dangerous at this juncture. A new synthesis, a fresh belief system that can integrate photographic imagery with other fine art is evolving in our day, and I wanted to help it emerge.

Indirection and implication seemed perfectly suited to my work. I determined to use photography in the spirit in which it was not intended, i.e. to degrade and reduce the exactitude and specificity which are the hallmarks of photographic vision, in order to produce the more minimalized, inclusive pictures I was after. At the same time, the minimized nature of my imagery would allow each image to be more easily layered with other images or fused with text. The trouble with my initial image/text experiments had been that they were just that: text banged up against an image. Both parts had remained whole within themselves. They retained their distinct, discrete character even when they were brought together. Now, however, my feeling was that by fragmenting both image and text, and minimizing the amount of information each fragment could carry, I could fuse the pieces together to create a greater whole. I hoped that when I reached that fusion point, the whole would be impossible to dissect without the meaning being lost in the process.

My starting point in *Story Problem* was the theme of a man-woman relationship, and its similarity to relations between two countries. I had a detailed script in hand, and images on film. I stayed very close to the photographic source material that I had shot in the studio, (using two fellow MFA's as models), though I changed my compositional ideas as I went along. With strategic queries and suggestions from Judy, I proceeded to junk most of the written script and reinvent it in light of the reality of the growing piece. I had decided not to map out the pictorial design in detail, and now let the flow of the evolving composition guide my choices on the spot. This became my working method as my thesis progressed: to immerse myself thoroughly in the feeling I wanted to convey; to limit the materials I would use; to keep the full sequence of events embodied in the piece in mind; to constantly visualize the double-sided, four-fold nature of the finished object, as well as its (human) height.

Since I dealt largely with the human figure, and my aim was to keep the work on a readable, human scale, I was reluctant at first to shrink or enlarge my figures very drastically. My scruples gave way, however, as I learned more about the effects of the larger-than-life figure, or the juxtaposition of different-size figures. I became bolder and more playful.

It's easy to track my changing attitude, my growing confidence with my tools, over the course of the first screen. The first side is more crowded, but more conventional in composition. It makes greater use of unaltered photographic imagery in the form of Xerox transfer. The colors are lower-key, there is a minimum of confusion in the composition, all the figures are roughly on the same scale. By the second side, I was getting my bearings; the layout is braver, the color is brighter, there is more reliance on metaphor, gesture and the cohesion of the side as a whole. This piece taught me how to reduce, to refine and edit, to speak with a touch or a taste rather than trying for gilding, grandeur or micro-detailing. In fact, I learned so much in the making of the first side of *Story Problem* that I worried about the second side turning out to be incompatible. I felt that I was losing my beginner's naivete, becoming over-sophisticated on the second side. Eventually, though, through a process of reconciliation, I managed to make the two sides blend smoothly.

One lesson I learned from the making of *Story Problem* was that I wouldn't have time to create the four screens I had originally envisioned. It turned out they were just too time-consuming. The first one had taken about twelve weeks, and I didn't want to shortchange my work and/or show because of time constraints. So, with a sigh of regret, I decided to cut back to two screens, using everything I knew at that point, and to find a second form to tell another kind of story. I began a search for that second form as I started work on the second screen.

I knew that the subject of the second screen would be a somewhat fictionalized version of my grandfather Sam Shapiro's emigration to America (partially to escape the Czar's draft), and his subsequent drafting into the American army in World War I. I had the images of Sam Shapiro I needed, and those of some other Sams, and I also had a found photograph of some first world war American recruits being drilled. I contacted my grandmother, Sam's widow, got her version of his story, and added it to what I'd heard and imagined. Then I wrote out the story in as factual a manner as I could, as if it were a newspaper account.

At this point I felt ready to begin making the object. I decided to make one large, slightly off-center image the focal point of side one, and to run the text in the style of a badly printed magazine or newspaper. Up close, the words could be read, but not the image. In the middle distance, both would collide and clamor for attention, and from farther away the image would take precedence, while the text would shrink down to an unreadable graphic texture. I wanted image and text to fight each other, as the antithesis of the first screen. In "Story Problem", my concern had been to make text and illustration of text dovetail and reinforce each other. In the Sam piece, I intended to emphasize conflict over harmony, uncertainty over assurance. It felt more appropriate to me as an expression of Sam's story.

How well I succeeded in my aim, I'm not sure. I disintegrated the central image into halftone dots in a manner that differed from the methods I used in the first screen. I reached more aggressively for size, abstraction and loss of detail. I applied color and stencilling in a more emotional, symbolic way because I wanted to be looser and more spontaneous with this screen. So, in a reprise of the first screen, I threw out most of what I had written beforehand, and wrote Sam's story as I went along.

When I reached the second side of Sam's screen, I knew it would be the last part of the show I would be able to complete. I repeated my pattern from the first side of the screen: I became more adventurous on the second side than I had been on the first. I made larger than life images of the various Sams and deployed them across the cloth in a fragmented way. Then I tied all the imagery together with a very large stencil of Sam the Greenhorn's symbol, the broken anchor. Since I knew there would be less text on Sam's second side, I did more selective coloring in order to lead the eye and knit my various fragments more firmly together. In the second screen as a whole, I felt less constrained to throw in every part and particle I could lay my hands on to fill the surface. I was freer to leave some "empty" areas, some resting space. Happily, I think my last efforts turned out to be my strongest.

At about the time I was completing the first side of Sam's screen, I hit on the idea for the tubes or columns that made up the remainder of my show. My partner in the show, Tom Santelli, and I had had some difficulty in securing a place to show. But eventually we had settled on the fifth floor gallery at RIT City Center. As we paced and measured and plotted out the space, my attention was drawn to the fourteen foot ceiling, with its attendant possibilities for three-dimensional display. I thought initially of flat translucent panels reflecting images projected from below. I was reminded of Daguerre's dioramas. Then I thought of arcs of cloth with images on them, perhaps cyanotyped or applied with Liquid Light. Eventually, I started to consider floor-to-ceiling columns that would mirror the large, square columns in the room. I thought of projecting slides inside translucent columns, or against the outside, or simply projecting changing colors inside or out. I thought of the fixed reliefs of classical columns, or totem poles, or obelisks. I knew that I wanted to weld family pictures into a kind of

family tree, and to do some self-portraiture, but the final fo the images would take only became clear to me in the process o making the objects. I felt from the beginning, though, that th columns would probably remain wordless, to tell their stories through pictures; and that's what happened.

2. Subject Matter

My reasons for addressing personal and family histor in my thesis can't all be articulated. Partly I think my choic of conflict,transformation, and memory as subject matter stems from their central importance in my world. Not only do they gr naturally out of my particular situation in my place and time, but they are also core issues of photography, and all art. My rationale ran along these lines: talk about what you know in terms that are intelligible to a majority of the people around you. I felt that a story of alliance, struggle, conflict and rapprochement in the world of relationships (between individua or collections of people) was a good starting place. Unfortunately, this sort of content tends to lead directly to pretension, pomposity, obscurity, cuteness, triviality, trendy serious deepness, and other familiar destinations. I had to tread cautiously, especially in my use of words. I wanted to m the relationships of the characters as idiosyncratic and individual as they were in my mind, to avoid overgeneralizing diluting my point. Achieving this goal in my imagery was easier--I used specific models in specific postures, and stuck with them, warts and all. The words required endless thought, refinement, and revision. The way I thought about my subject, and my working methods, changed as I made progress on the firs screen. I became interested in words as instruments of implication, rather than enunciators of the concrete. Though m characters were solid individuals, I felt, paradoxically, that

the best way to describe them and their relations was to imply, to edge meaning in, rather than lay it on a salver in the center of the table. I also mixed words with the body of images, broke words down into segments or fragments, and used the layout of words to imply different ideas and facilitate the flow of images across the cloth.

These problems of word forms were fascinating to me not only in themselves, but as metaphors for the substance of what they were to communicate. Form and subject matter have never been clearly separate in my mind, and in my thesis I felt them become more tightly bound up than ever before.

An interest in storytelling naturally leads one home, sooner or later. My family's experiences are by no means unique or terribly exotic, but I know them by heart. I felt that the homeliness and down-to-earth quality of a story like Sam's would keep the work from degenerating into arid formal experiments; I wanted, and still want, my work to speak in a voice comprehensible to a non-art-educated audience. When I summoned up the voice of Sam, I tried to hear his tone and inflection as clearly as I could. With his help, I kept the narrative of *Uncle Sam Meets Sam the Greenhorn* off the theoretical plane entirely, without detracting from the singular mystery that is Sam's character. My subject matter ended up being the transformation process itself: Sam the European peasant becomes Sam the Emigrant; Sam the Greenhorn; Soldier Sam; Sam the Family Man; Citizen Sam. Two people become two nations, independent, warring, coexisting; the family photograph collection becomes a tree of ghosts; The tangible and intangible substance of real people and events becomes transubstantiated, transmuted into artistic fiction.

3. Technique

Characteristically, for me, I had little or no training in the various media I wound up using; for example, the way I used the airbrush would probably seem idiosyncratic to the point of lunacy to someone formally versed in its use. My use of crude and perishable stencils rather than frisket, my blurring, speckling, overlapping of images, my use of a dime-store airbrush, and the haphazard-looking combinations of media only make sense in the context of the kind of work I was doing. Therefore, bearing in mind my particularly interwoven process and product, I thought it would be worthwhile to summarize my use of physical means and techniques.

Cyanotype/lith film

In terms of square footage, far and away my most-used technique. In the first screen, cyanotype provided the background color, and helped define the outlining around individual figures. I used what were, in retrospect, some small lith negatives in *Story Problem* to give parts of some figures shading or minimal detail via enlarged halftone dots. This was achieved by enlarging 35mm halftone positives onto lith film, using a horizontal enlarger. When I moved on to larger-scale lith/cyanotype images later on, I switched over to a slide projector with a zoom lens. I used 8 X 10 film throughout my thesis project, for reasons of economy and convenience in processing. I also grew to see the aesthetic possibilities of fractured, bent and deemphasized grids. When I exposed the film for the first side of the Sam screen, this meant pinning, unpinning, processing, drying and reassembling about a hundred 8 X 10 sheets. While this may seem to the uninitiated to be a laborious, not to say fanatical, waste

of time , it created a unique rough-grid effect, and enabled me to create a (for me) tremendously large image independent of RIT's facilities.

If the color is acceptable, I strongly recommend cyanotype as a creative medium. Its economy, flexibility, reliability and simplicity make it irresistable--provided you can work with blueness. Other than its (literally) ironbound palette, cyanotype's main drawback is its insensitivity. With the help of MFA/genius, Tom Enesey, I converted a streetlamp fixture into an ultravioletlight source (a.k.a., the Death Ray). This became my main means of exposure. It could expose an area of sensitized cloth in 4-7 hours, depending on the age and thickness of the applied emulsion. Normal daylight exposure of a cyanotype is about 20 minutes. I urge and implore any future thesis explorer, tempted by large-scale cyanotype, to execute as much as possible during the summer. There are very few powerful UV generators available to the general public, and those few are prohibitively expensive. Because I worked during the winter in Rochester, it took me anywhere from four to seven days to expose each piece.

Xerox transfer

I used this technique sparingly, because it was too expensive and too literal for this work. I used it more as an emphasis, a spice, than as a general-purpose ingredient. For my introduction to both cyanotype and Xerox transfer, I owe a debt of gratitude to Judy Natal. But what is Xerox transfer, and how does it work? Photocopy machines take a finely-divided plastic dust (toner), and melt (fuse) it to a piece of bond paper to form an image. In the normal course of photocopying, the image cannot be erased, smeared, or otherwise manipulated. However, if the heating element (fuser) is turned off, unfused copies result.

An unfused copy is a complete but unanchored image, which can be smeared, erased, or transferred to another surface by rubbing from the back. It was a disappointment, early on, to discover how badly photocopy images transfer to cloth (I was using unbleached muslin). My breakthrough in this area was the mostly accidental discovery that acrylic matte medium is one answer to transfer difficulties. If the receiving (cloth) surface is given a coat of acrylic matte medium and allowed to dry for at least half an hour, copy images will transfer almost perfectly. A protective overcoat of matte medium or some other transparent substance is a good idea; transferred unfused images are prone to smearing off with the passage of time.

Airbrush/stencil

There are stacks of books on airbrush technique, and I've flipped through my share. But the standard methods are, by and large, too polished, too sterile for my taste. I have no desire to create heavy metal album covers or advertizing illustrations, or to customize motorcycle tanks. My goals, and my means of achieving them, are much more modest and imperfect than the aims of the how-to books.

The roots of my airbrush work lie in the enamel spray can. I would have stuck to that most excellent invention but for a few annoying drawbacks. The palette is pretty limited; the cost becomes prohibitive; and I wanted to be able to work indoors and still have friends and brain cells. Acrylic paint was and is the right material for me because of its transparency, color possibilities, cost and ease of use. A painted area could hold numerous overlapped images, all applied within hours of each other, and be completely dry within twelve hours. And a little paint goes a long way.

The airbrush I ended up using was the lowest hobbyist model available, circa $9.95. This simple tool, combined with an X-acto knife, taught me more about shape, design, and the infinite uses of color than ten art seminars and twenty museums. For my initial encounters with color, I need to credit Martha Leinroth; after the introduction she gave me, I found I had to make it up as I went along.

My usual airbrush process consisted of a series of steps: cutting an initial stencil; making tracings from the resultant painted shape to cut stencils for additional colors; building layers of paint for greater opacity; sputtering paint or laying down more seamless layers. For the first screen, I cut stencils of all the lettering I used. For these words, and any other multilayered areas or shapes, I used outdated Ektacolor paper for stencils: its resin-coated structure could stand up to repeated dousings with water-based (and watery) paint. For one-shot stencils, I used bond paper or other uncoated paper, occasionally even tracing paper. These transient stencils were inevitably done in after one use. I occasionally stretched them further, but only with a lot of extra effort. Working with one-shot procedures added quite a bit of zest to the proceedings, since accidents and discoveries are an inescapable byproduct. When I used the airbrush, and for that matter when I used other media, I tried to avoid a straight path between plotting and execution. At all stages of creation, I left room for spontaneity, and spontaneity left its big sloppy thumbprints all over everything.

Rubber stamp/acrylic

This I would say is the apogee of imprinting and thinking on one's feet. I realized as I completed the first screen that the second would be wordier. It was patently

impractical to cut stencils for hundreds or thousands of words. What were my alternatives? I wanted lettering that would be crude and elegant, forceful, companionable, but above all legible and appropriate to the atmosphere and subject matter. I felt that it should be a challenge to apply the letters, that that would help give the piece an air of conviction. I decided to use a set of rubber alphabet stamps and black acrylic paint.

This is one of the more tortuous methods ever conceived for the purpose of printing a text. Paint, particularly acrylic, was never meant to be used in this manner, and rubber stamps are designed for thin, water-based inks, not gluey plastic pigment products. The upshot of this mismatch of paint and tools was that the overall progress of words applied to cloth was very slow, whereas the application had to happen quickly and decisively. The lettering on *Uncle Sam Meets Sam the Greenhorn* is the fruit of about 90 hours of letter-by-letter stamping, scraping of stamps, rolling out of paint, etc. I feel in retrospect that only Rochester or some other powerful trauma could induce the extreme state necessary to do what I did the way I did it. I like the result very much, though. It's a mixed feeling.

4. Conclusion

My thesis work took me through places I had never been before. The length and depth of concentration on a goal that existed only in my imagination, having to live with incremental progress as I slowly picked my way forward, was a kind of image-making experience I had never envisioned before. I felt something of what the painter feels: my boundaries were dictated only by my stamina and my mental horizons. Both went farther than I thought possible at the outset of the journey.

New forms, new possibilities for my photography...I can conceive of the photograph as encompassing a wide range of appearances, moods amd feelings, many unsuspected, in the same way as a deep mountain lake might hold unnamed, unsuspected kinds of life. We in photography are at the stage where the efficacy and truthfulness of the photograph have been levelled by questions. Those values that led to the invention of photography, that caused people a hundred and fifty years ago to marvel and rejoice in the simplicity, veracity and objective nature of the process are now a dead issue. Nothing is Simple, Objective or True for us the way it might have been to people less knowledgeable or less burdened with awareness. To me, the widespread probing of forms in contemporary photography is a sign of emerging new canons of photographic judgement. These emerging criteria of judgement pull the photograph ever closer to consideration as one more art form, to be spoken of in the same breath as the traditional fine arts. Part of the new acceptance of photography in the art world's main stream is no doubt due to the gluttonous appetite of the world art market for fresh possibilities for investment. But even without the inflation of the prices of photographic art, I believe that sooner or later the concept of photography as the ultimate proof of what is, or what was, will be as irrelevant as the bayonet charge was in the face of the machine gun. The line between art and science, or fiction and nonfiction, between subjective and objective, has died out of every other form of art; and since the time of Heisenberg and Einstein, the same dilemmas have troubled philosophers in the sciences. Only photography hangs onto the remains of its 19th-century placenta.

Photography as science posits a sort of peephole on the world. A one-way mirror through which we can obtain a privileged view of phenomena without getting our hands dirty. If, alternatively, I happen to believe in photography as art, dialogue inevitably follows. Dialogue between artist and work,

viewer and work, and, in the best of all possible worlds, between artist and viewer. If my thesis has taught me anything (and I would contend that it has), it is that meaningful art is made by listening and observing, not by supposition and imposition. If one comes to the raw material with an attitude of listening as well as having something to say, of a willingness to be guided by as well as to guide the process, and a genuine need to do art, it's hard to go wrong. If one listens to the voices of the work, and images become part of a conversation, the individuality and style of the artist are bound to be strengthened and enriched. Good art is good expression; it proves nothing, though it may try awfully hard.

The products of self-consciousness and self-aggrandizement fade. Art *isn't* a product, it's an attitude and a way of life. Art lights the way down the dark passage: it sustains us with the stories it tells.

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